

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Potentialities of Web 2.0 and new challenges for destinations: insights from Italy

Abstract

Web 2.0 influences the relationship between supply and demand even in the tourism sector, forcing those who manage destinations (DMOs) to review the ways in which they enhance a territory's assets. As an exploratory contribution, this paper aims to answer two research questions: are the daily activities on social networks able to influence the marketing approach of DMOs and in what ways and to what extent can the daily activities on social networks enhance the brand equity of destinations?

We will achieve this goal by analysing the digital marketing activities of one of the top Italian destinations (case study method).

This paper shows that Web 2.0 offers many opportunities for value creation and promotion, but it also presents important challenges.

Keywords: Web 2.0; destinations; value; social networks; crowdsourcing.

Introduction

The rapid development of the Internet is influencing a number of markets, giving consumers new power (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger, & Shapiro, 2012; Kozinets & Handelman, 1998; Labrecque, von Esche, Mathwick, Novak, & Hofacker, 2013) and redefining the relationships between supply and demand (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011). This also applies to tourism (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Buhalis & Spada, 2000; Xiang & Gretzel, 2009), first with a new category of digital players (e.g. websites for booking, websites for writing and reading reviews by other tourists, websites for sharing, and so on) that support more and more skilled and independent tourists. New technologies and Web 2.0 (the web for sharing and conversation) are subsequently determining further changes in this field (Munar & Jacobsen, 2013).

In this scenario, word of mouth may exert a strong impact on the brand image of destinations, as well as tourists' purchasing processes (McCarthy, Stock, & Verma, 2010). For example, in a study by Del Chiappa (2011b) on a sample of Italian tourists, the interviewees changed their previous choices of accommodation after reading online comments and reviews. The statistics show that 64.8% change their mind sometimes, 12% nearly always, and 0.5% always. Another study by Del Chiappa (2011a) revealed that nearly 32% of tourists modify their accommodation booking previously made with a travel agency, based on the experiences reported by other travellers online. With digital natives (Tapscott, 2009), these figures are very likely to increase (Kozinets, 1999). Another useful finding comes from the study carried out by Yoo, Lee, Gretzel, & Fesenmaier (2009) on a sample of 1,170 American tourists. It revealed that online users' comments and reviews are more credible and effective when published on official tourism bureau websites. This could provide an indication to the managers of tourist destinations that they ought to change their marketing schemes to include value creation and promotion (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007).

Our contribution aims to gain a deeper understanding of such an evolutionary scenario from the point of view of the "regions", which are the real destination management organizations (DMOs) in Italy. This is a still-neglected topic in the extant literature. In fact, while the literature on how Web 2.0 is affecting marketing for companies is flourishing, the same is not true for DMOs.

Thus, our article aims to be an exploratory study that sheds light on the key points to be analysed in depth in further contributions. In this sense, the present article is the starting point for our wider research pathway, within a recursive theory-building process (Eisenhardt, 2007).

To this end, we have adopted the case study method and have chosen the region of Emilia Romagna, one of the most active and revelatory regions in Italy for tourism.

In the following sections, we will briefly discuss some insights gained from the literature on the evolution of marketing from the social media perspective, on one side, and on the value processes of DMOs, on the other side, to set up our research questions. We will then describe the methodology adopted for data collection and analysis and, finally, we will present and discuss the empirical findings and the limitations of the study.

Literature review

Web 2.0 is a digital environment in which people have the opportunity to chat, ask for advice, comment, express opinions, and provide contributions and ideas, supporting content creation and socialization (Kim & Ko, 2012). From the marketing point of view, it is a place for new forms of aggregation within social networks, which are a group of Internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In fact, Web 2.0 is a channel through which everyone has the chance (even if they have no technical skills) to create content and share it with other people, institutions, and companies, thus becoming involved in conversation networks. Nowadays, people are increasingly interested in creating and co-creating content and they have many ways of doing so.

It is worth noting that Web 2.0 is not only a new technological platform because it is the transposition into a virtual environment of a society looking for new relationships and new forms of expression (Fortezza, 2009), but also a platform for sharing experiences and values, on which people can join a “community of sense”. As such, this also represents a place to gain interesting insights from the demand side (Kozinets, 2002) and even new product ideas (Sigala, 2012).

All of these evolutionary factors deriving from Web 2.0 lead to some important consequences for companies, organizations, and destinations.

First of all, special digital places need to be designed (Moffitt & Dover, 2010), consistent with traditional web spaces (i.e. web portals) (Hanna et al., 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), where people can feel comfortable about expressing themselves. This is no longer a top-down kind of communication; it has become “many-to-many” from an open network perspective. While there is still someone (a company, an organization, and so forth) who plays a leading role in communication processes, it occurs in different ways compared with the past (Weber, 2007). In this sense, marketing managers are asked to engage in new behaviour (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Peters, Chen, Kaplan, Ognibeni, & Pauwels, 2013), based on high-quality storytelling, user engagement, and empowerment. They are also asked to develop new skills to understand and enhance a huge and steady flow of data sourced every day from social media activities (Akehurst, 2009). Furthermore, it is necessary to consider carefully the risks that occur when an organization enters the dynamics of social networks, even in relation to negative opinions, which oblige marketing managers to act rapidly and honestly through smart practices.

Generally speaking, all of the marketing changes required in the aftermath of the 2.0 evolution are related to marketing’s more humanistic viewpoint, which recognizes the importance of activating and boosting people and relationships in a non-persuasive way, that is to say, following co-evolutionary paths as opposed to the traditional (i.e. transactional) mainstream perspective. In this regard, some authors, like Cova (1999), refer to “societing”.

Regarding the enhancement of tourist destinations, this topic is still subject to in-depth analysis from the theoretical point of view and interesting evolutions in practical terms.

It is a matter of fact that the communication of destinations needs to be integrated in a consistent way with the entire process of creation and communication of value (Pencarelli & Forlani, 2002). DMOs have to plan, create (making the best system of local players and “talents” emerge), and then promote an “overall tourist experience”. A complex network of players is therefore involved at multiple levels (Fyall, Garrod, & Tosun, 2006) to generate tourist satisfaction (by creating multiple “moments of truth”) and thus improve the destination

brand equity (Buhalis, 2000).

Communication gives tourists the opportunity to “taste in advance” and/or recall the potentialities and the magic of a destination. From this point of view, in the last few years, tourists have been increasingly seeking “authenticity” (Fortezza & Pencarelli, 2011; Gilmore & Pine, 2007) in an effort to discover the true identity of places and experience all of their unique features.

For DMOs, Web 2.0 represents a new and still fairly unknown playground, at least in Italy. It presents significant challenges (Choi, Lehto, & O'Leary, 2007; Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2011; Gretzel & Jamal, 2009; Hays, Page, & Buhalis, 2013; Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2012; Yayli, Bayram, & Bayram, 2011).

Beyond the issues already mentioned, DMOs have to face another problem that companies do not, that is, integrating the communication streams generated by a plurality of players in the territory (Neuhofer et al., 2012; Siano & Vollero, 2012). Multiple political, economic, and private players in a tourist destination can lead to multiple voices, and these can lead, in turn, to a loss of control of communication. In overall terms, DMOs have to manage relationships with and obtain feedback from end-users as well as other local institutions and stakeholders. This requires a strong ability to manage complex network issues (Gummesson, 1997).

Our contribution aims to answer two research questions about the relationship between Web 2.0 and destination marketing: are the daily activities on social networks able to influence the marketing approach of DMOs and in what ways and to what extent can the daily activities on social networks enhance the brand equity of destinations?

Methodology

Nowadays, in Italy, the regions can be considered the real destination management organizations (DMOs). They interact upstream with the central government and downstream with the provinces and municipalities.

As an exploratory study, we decided to adopt the case study method (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1994), a research method suitable for thoroughly analysing the objects of the investigation.

The case that we studied is TER, or Tourism in Emilia Romagna, which is the operating office responsible for the social media marketing of the Emilia Romagna region (in central Italy). TER was created in 2009 to set up a multilingual platform of “expression and sharing” that would be consistent with the positioning strategy and branding of Emilia Romagna and complementary to other web spaces and traditional communication initiatives.

The reason for choosing Emilia Romagna is that this region is one of the top and most proactive Italian destinations, with the greatest name recognition of places along the coast, known as the “Riviera Romagnola”. Here, compared with other front-runner destinations in Italy, innovation in tourism usually emerges earlier. Furthermore, according to a study carried out by Cosenza (2012), Emilia Romagna is the Italian region with the highest level of performance on Twitter (in terms of the number of followers and the frequency of engagement), which is rapidly catching up with the success of Italy’s most popular social network, Facebook, and it is widely acknowledged as the social network for innovators.

We argue that TER can be an interesting starting point for our research process, which will then include further steps with the analysis of other strong cases.

For the data collection, four interviews were conducted with TER from December 2012 to November 2013. The first interview was carried out face to face with all of the members of the TER work group to gain a deep understanding of TER’s marketing approach, of its content policy, and of the most important digital campaigns that it carries out. Three additional interviews were conducted with TER’s community manager alone, to obtain information about the campaigns and orientation.

Each interview was fully transcribed, and the contents were then organized according to the most significant items with the potential to answer the research questions. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by one of the two authors of this paper. Data analysis of the

approximately fifteen pages' worth of material was carried out by both authors.

As a second source of data, all of TER's web spaces were taken into account from November 2012 to November 2013 to obtain research notes about two main aspects: TER's approach to the different social networks and the kind of interactions that take place among and between users and TER in the daily activities on the social networks. These insights were noted down step by step, then fully transcribed into a five-page report and coded.

Results

The TER mission and marketing approach

The TER project was created in accordance with explorative logics, knowing that it was impossible not to be present in the new digital environments. "Our project is a test that is gradually evolving", says Giovanni Arata, TER's community manager. "At the very start of the project, TER was an experiment, a test. Our initiatives were so favourably received that expectations grew. Now, however, we have to face the problem of available resources." The problem of resources is a key point, most of all in consideration of the importance of TER's duties.

TER aims to promote places and events in the widest way, giving importance to the emotions that places can evoke and to local traditions. From this point of view, TER is working on the communication capacity of the region, most of all for small places. Moreover, it wants to produce internal effects. "By reading comments or chats on our web spaces" – explains Giovanni Arata, TER's community manager – "you realize that the inhabitants of the region feel a strong sense of identification, pride, and belonging that is facilitated by social networks. Therefore, we feel that our work is an important contribution in this sense."

An important goal is to strengthen the identity of Emilia Romagna, building up its online reputation, from the international point of view as well, by making contact with web opinion leaders.

With its online strategy, the Emilia Romagna region also targets high-value niches, even the smallest ones, using engaging communicative solutions such as storytelling. The starting point is that for all the most important aspects of the touristic identity of the region (seaside, art, nature, food), there may be a tourist segment interested in that aspect. Therefore, the final goal is for Emilia Romagna to move gradually towards a niche strategy.

TER's goal is also to provide customer care, addressing users on the existing institutional web pages and giving tourists the first answers to their queries. An interesting aspect is that the questions that TER's staff cannot answer (e.g. requests for information on hotels or restaurants) are forwarded to the community.

In the end, TER aims to create effective interaction among the regional players who may have a role in promoting the best local attractions. For this reason, TER's staff is always in contact with the provincial and municipal tourist offices throughout Emilia Romagna, as well as with the creative communities in the territory (e.g. Instagramers). "Our true mission is split among the different parts of the region", says Giovanni Arata, TER's community manager.

Today, TER's staff consists of five people (three of them full-time) with different specializations: sociology, philosophy, communication, tourism economy, and information technology. The presence of multitasking and complementary people in TER's work group (e.g. people who deal with the Internet also have specific skills, like taking photos and processing images) appears to offer a temporary solution to the problem of scarce resources, but it is likely to resurface in the future. Thus, staff increases may be necessary to meet the challenges of the multiple developments that the project could undergo once the current experimental phase is over. For example, the Web 2.0 channel is currently not being used in an organized way to acquire useful information to fine-tune the initiatives included in the regional tourism plan. However, this could be an important and challenging evolution for Emilia Romagna in the near future.

Web spaces and publishing policy

As stated before, TER's web spaces are complementary to Emilia Romagna's tourism portal, which is mainly a showcase.

Every social network used by TER has a specific role, to avoid the overlapping of content and, if possible, to create synergies among channels. Moreover, for each social network, specific guidelines have been set up to guarantee a steady level of content and a consistent style.

The blog, written both in Italian and in English, expands the storytelling on Facebook and Twitter. The topics vary according to the time of year. For the Italian version, there are five posts a day (from Monday to Friday), while for the English version, there are three posts a week (on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday).

The Facebook web page (in Italian, English, German, Spanish, and Portuguese) posts eight or ten times a day, and at least two of the posts are dedicated to local food and wine. In this field, the guidelines touch on several aspects, for example posting even in non-working hours, enhancing pictures (due to their emotional power), and assuring positive and quick feedback on the contents published by the community (there is a commitment to providing answers within 24 hours).

The Twitter web page (in Italian, English, and German) displays a greater number of daily posts (20–25), in keeping with this social network's orientation towards rapid communication. One of the most important activities is the constant monitoring of relevant hashtags (i.e. #emiliaromagna, #notterosa) to acquire important information in real time. In this field, the publishing rules address these points: using images only on the "TER's friends take photos" page, using a specific thematic channel ("@Delizier") for food and wine news, and adopting a more informative and less emotional way of writing.

The Pinterest web page presents some boards with interesting themes regarding the positioning of the region (i.e. food, important people) and specific boards concerning TER's initiatives (i.e. "Christmas 2013"). The task undertaken by this communication channel is to collect all the images in the different networks in which TER is present.

The Instagram web page acquires photo contents in real time, which can add good content to other social networks (e.g. Facebook); thus, the same content posted on several social networks can yield overall positive effects. Crowdsourcing (the co-creation of content over the Internet) and building a connection with creative, local Instagram communities are important aspects to keep in mind. In this case, too, there are precise publishing guidelines, such as always associating links and text contents to images and publishing ad hoc contents, based on time slots during the day, for example to allow users to see a wonderful sunrise from one of the locations in the region.

The Flickr web page is complementary to Instagram for high-quality images. This space is used as a photo gallery. The YouTube channel is used as a portfolio of movies at the service of other social networks. Last, Google+ is a social network that the region is currently exploring.

To appreciate the participation and involvement of users in the different web channels, some standard metrics (Google Analytics, FB Insights, TweetReach, PinReach, goo.gl) are used by TER. They also engage in some methodical but unstructured benchmarking with other Italian regions.

TER's marketing 2.0 initiatives

According to the interviewees, the publishing line of TER is based on a conversational and non-promotional style, with the aim of encouraging people to share their opinions with others. Our study points out that in TER's web spaces there are "shared tales", which are better than traditional forms of communication.

For example, "Adopt a word" is a project that started in 2010 to improve Wikipedia's entries referring to Emilia Romagna. After having analysed some of the most relevant items (first, TER's staff identified about 70, then the community added additional important items), users were asked to apply to the website to "adopt" a word. Every "foster parent" has to care for that

word, explaining all the references to it by verifying and improving Wikipedia's entries related to it. If more than one person wants to adopt the same word, TER's staff invites them to decide which part of the role to carry out, possibly sharing tasks and working together. This approach helps to improve the visibility of places and highlights the distinguishing features of the region, thus boosting the involvement of the community.

"TER's chef for one day" is a type of "shared recipe book" that collects recipes for traditional dishes that showcase the region's gastronomic heritage, following the segmentation strategies and tourism positioning of the region.

"Speak about TER" is a weekly blog initiative (on Wednesdays) that publishes users' tales of Emilia Romagna, encouraging them to talk about the region from their point of view.

"Pic of the day" is a daily feature. Each day TER chooses the most striking image from those proposed by users and publishes it on its social networks.

"InstaTER" is a hybrid online and offline campaign. It consists of photo trips organized with Instagramers throughout the region (a different location is chosen each time). In this way, people can share their passion, thus expressing their talent and creativity.

"#myER" is a monthly photo contest on different themes. In this case, too, the online and offline communication dimensions meet each other and quality content is acquired via crowdsourcing.

Last but not least, "Blogville" is a project related to the internationalization of the region and utilizes travel bloggers, who are important opinion leaders, as levers. In this case, 2 apartments (located in Bologna and Rimini) are made available for a period of 3 months for 50 bloggers from all around the world. Up to now, the project has won international awards and has generated an interesting spin-off on social media, with more than 10,000 tweets, 2,000 posts on Facebook, 200 posts on blogs, and 3,000 images and videos.

Conclusion and implications

Web 2.0 will play an increasingly important role in the future. From this point of view, much is still to come.

In relation to our first research question, regarding how daily activities on social networks can influence the marketing approach of DMOs, Web 2.0 appears to have not only a functional role, but also a possible strategic role, as Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre (2011) posited. According to the results of the interviews with TER, social media activities generate important market information (about customers and other destinations), which can orient the DMO's entire decision-making and planning process, provided that the decision-making process remains open and flexible (Schianetz, Kavanagh, & Lockington, 2007), because the information flows are continual and dynamic. For this to occur, it is crucial for the DMO to have a strategic understanding and awareness of the fact that social networks represent a two-way channel, for communicating with the market and for acquiring that all-important information. The DMO must be open to and willing to seize the opportunities that the new scenario offers. This is a strong challenge if we consider the traditional orientation of DMOs in a country such as Italy.

We also aimed to understand the ways in which and the extent to which the daily activities on social networks can enhance the brand equity of destinations. Social media combine some of the characteristics of traditional marketing management with online word of mouth, in which managers cannot control the content and frequency of the information (Glynn & Faulds, 2009; Peters et al., 2013) and creative consumers are the new focus of value.

All these points lead to several challenges. First of all, it is possible to increase the amount, variety, and originality of content. The sharing of users' content also contributes to spreading ideas and building bonds, even with "internal effects" for places. In particular, storytelling and co-creation seem to be the best way to obtain "customers' delight" (Pera, 2014).

As described above, online activities can be mixed with offline experiences to reinforce further the sense of fondness for and trust in places.

Specific segments, even niche segments, of tourists can be sought out, at the international as

well as the domestic level. Communication can be combined with customer care activities. Even in this case there can be emotional benefits.

Moreover, 2.0 channels reveal the authenticity of the territory, describing what would otherwise be unknown, that is to say, architectural attractions, natural beauty spots, local traditions and folklore, the smallest towns, and local events. It would not be possible to mention all these aspects in the advertising campaign of a region. This is also an important “systemic contribution” to cohesion among territorial stakeholders. Furthermore, it incites people (even those who are based in the region) to visit less-known places.

It is also worth noting that some traditional communication activities can be less expensive and more effective if carried out by social networks. For example, public relations are likely to be conducted through social media channels (e.g. Twitter), which could more cheaply, more immediately, and, thus, more effectively address relational issues.

Thanks to the daily 2.0 activities, greater cohesion and integration among the different levels of supply and territorial promotion can be built, namely in a non-top-down way, thus creating a “sense container” that helps to connect the day-to-day offerings and different initiatives for tourists and visitors along one central idea.

All of the above carries significant managerial implications. In general terms, big advertising campaigns will probably become obsolete, giving way to digital initiatives that are more suitable for describing places in an emotional way. However, for this to happen, DMOs will have to follow some specific steps.

First of all, they have to trust users’ competences, “calling for their help” (Berthon et al., 2012) and thus recognizing their skills, with an open-minded approach. This must be based on a publishing line (consistent with the segmentation strategies and tourism positioning of the territory) that is able to stimulate the best participation not only of users, but also of local stakeholders. From this point of view, it is necessary to involve local tourist offices and associations that are able to increase the visibility and reputation of places without generating confusion for users.

DMOs have to think carefully about the activities previously undertaken (Hays et al., 2013; Wang, 2008), especially because of the birth of new spaces, the evolution of existing ones, and the deterioration of some of them (i.e. Friendfeed). In fact, the new digital environment is constantly changing. Therefore, it is necessary to map and pay attention to different spaces and make a choice based on the potentialities and role played by each of them, apart from the amount of available resources. In addition, the cultural differences of communities of users of Web 2.0 and of different tools in multiple countries (for example, Facebook and Twitter are not used in Asian countries and Eastern Europe) represent crucial issues that must be faced.

There must also be complex daily management to handle the large quantity of information coming from social media. From this point of view, the increased use of Web 2.0 presents an opportunity to increase the marketing capacities (especially in terms of consumer understanding and customer care) of people who deal with the management and enhancement of destinations.

Finally, social media management requires human resources with new skills. In our opinion, they should be internal resources (employees or collaborators) as opposed to the norm with offline communication and, on some points, institutional online communication. The reason is that, unlike an advertising campaign, social media management requires deep knowledge of the territory, its peculiarities, and its needs, but also of the specific governance processes of territorial branding. The need for a high level of competence may be difficult to satisfy due to the low budgets of many DMOs (such as those in Italy), in addition to the misunderstanding of the potentialities and critical issues to be faced with the new 2.0 media.

To conclude, our contribution is exploratory and clearly has some limitations. The main limitation is that the research focuses on a single case study, so the results cannot be generalized. However, they make it possible to focus on some interesting issues that need to be studied in greater depth.

We learnt that in the new digital environments, the relationships between supply and demand are always changing in favour of consumers and that the critical factors of competitive areas are

based on the capacity to manage relationships with customers and people over the Internet, even difficult ones. This implies transparent and authentic marketing approaches. This managerial approach to markets requires a deep cultural change, which is both critical and crucial for destinations.

We think that the existing literature could benefit from studies that delve into the following aspects: different approaches to the governance of the digital identity of places; the relationship between traditional communication tools and new digital tools, knowing that they will become increasingly important in adopting efficient ways to give value to attractions, because of the low budget available for many DMOs; the best solutions for managing 2.0 activities with the aim of integrating them with other destination marketing and decision-making activities; and strong metrics for measuring the digital performance of DMOs.

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